

The Providence Journal

METRO EDITION

TUESDAY

OCTOBER 16, 2001

Truancy courts keep pupils in their seats

The eighth in-school truancy court in the state will open Nov. 5 at the Gilbert Stuart Middle School, where the absentee rate hovers around 20 percent.

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PROVIDENCE — Encouraged by the success of the state's seven other school-based truancy courts, Chief Family Court Judge Jeremiah S. Jeremiah Jr. went to the Gilbert Stuart Middle School yesterday to celebrate the opening of another.

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The new court — which is scheduled to hold its first session at Gilbert Stuart on Nov. 5 — will be headed by Magistrate Angela Bucci, who was chief of juvenile prosecution in the attorney general's office before joining the Family Court.

She, along with a bevy of other school officials, said that given the court's success in sharply reducing absenteeism at Hope High School and in middle schools in Pawtucket, Central Falls, Woonsocket, Cranston, Newport and the

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Bristol-Warren School District, they were confident of having the same results here.

Judge Jeremiah said that since Providence began a school-based truancy court at Hope High School, it has become apparent that the truancy can be more effectively addressed when youngsters are still in middle school.

Mary Archibald, a social worker who also serves as the truant officer at Gilbert Stuart, said Gilbert Stuart has had an especially difficult time with absenteeism, with 20 percent of the students typically absent on any given day.

Bucci, who will be conducting her truancy court out of a room in the school's first floor, said her experience at Hope and at middle schools suggests that truancy has many different reasons — be it a fear of being embarrassed in front of one's peers, or other problems related to mental health or attitudes of parents.

"There are cases where the parents don't even know that the child is not in school," Bucci said. "If the parents don't know English, they can be at the child's mercy and not even know that their child is deleting messages from the answering machine or withholding letters."

Under the law, the Family Court judge or the magistrate can impose \$50-per-day fines on parents whose children don't show up at school, or a \$500 fine and up to six months in jail if a student is absent 30 days or more.

But Bucci said she's never had to impose that. Instead, she holds weekly court sessions — with both parent and child present — to review the student's attendance and performance, and to establish an education plan with them.

Typically, with counseling and intervention, the issues that caused the youngster to stay away from school are gradually addressed and the student's self-esteem goes "way up," Bucci said. When it becomes clear that the student is starting to do well

and is no longer skipping school, she'll release the parent from having to attend the weekly sessions.

As for the effectiveness of a truancy court, Archibald said 75 percent of the Hope High School students who were brought before the court last year stopped skipping school, and many of the students who had been on the verge of opting out completely decided to stay in.

Judge Jeremiah said the in-school courts are a major improvement, cutting down the time when a case first goes before a judge from three months to three weeks.

Not only that, he said, but by having the sessions in school, a youngster is likely to miss only 20 minutes of class — as opposed to missing a whole morning or more if the session were held at Family Court.

He said the effort to keep young people in school is especially important, given his findings that of the 9,000 juveniles who end up getting in trouble with the law each year, 94 percent have been truant at least once.

By contrast, he said, he can cite instances where former truants have, through the help of the Family Court, turned their lives around, including two students from Mount Pleasant High School who have received scholarships to college.

Magistrate Bucci said she expects her Mondays to be taken up holding court at Gilbert Stuart and Hope High School.